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African Common Denominators across the South Atlantic: A Conversation

T.: In the series of lecture on *AfricAmericas* in the Fall and Winter of 2004-2005, we dealt with numerous aspects of the history, sociology, literature, visual art of the African heritage in the Americas and its feedback to Africa. What seems to me to be a thrilling issue from a Brazilian point of view is the finding of 'common denominators' between contemporary cultural expressions in Brazil and those in African regions, whose history has become important to our country. Is there any such common denominator and how could we approach this question through our research? For example, if there are a hundred types of samba in existence, where are the common unifying principles to allow us to speak of all these variations as samba? Is there a common denominator? Assuming that there is, than we stumble upon certain African traits, which can be traced unequivocally to central Africa, and notably to Angola. Some of these common principles seem to include: a) three levels of rhythmic interaction; b) *toques* as a space-sound-motion concept; c) the concept of time-line patterns, including the idea of an inherent time-line; d) specific motional behavior and sound production; e) the interface between language and musical patterns, expressed in mnemonic syllables and phrases; f) responsorial form in song phraseology; g) timbre as an important aspect of musical composition besides rhythm, melody, etc. In addition there is the phenomenon of aesthetics and sensibility as a deep-level creating structure, which cannot be traced as such to Africa but are analogous to the African forms due to a similar approach to composition and to comparable mental procedures.

G.: Congratulations! You have in part answered your question already and your list of comparable traits and forms of behavior that link samba with certain types of Central African music is impressive, moreover since you do not stop at trait by trait analysis, but quite obviously proceed to a level of analogous thought patterns and forms of

behavior that are not easily explained. I would like to add a few remarks about methodology that might be of use to anyone pursuing this set of questions. It is important to distinguish between designations and phenomena, i.e., the forms and behavioral patterns they describe.

In the first place, samba is obviously a designation, as much as jazz, blues, etc. What these designations mean is variable in time and space. For example, in Central Africa there are numerous groups that call themselves jazz bands, even some famous ones, such as the historical "OK Jazz", of the late Franco in Kinshasa, but no jazz student would call what those musicians play jazz. In Malawi there is the "Fumbi Jaz Band". They play a kind of music derived from the *chimurenga* music of Zimbabwe. There is not a trace of jazz in their performances. And yet, they call themselves a jazz band. In Mozambique, my colleague Moya A. Malamusi discovered a group of Lomwe-speaking musicians with a drum chime playing a new kind of music. They called their music "Samba Ng'oma Eight". I am sure that, if they ever claimed that their music was samba in the Brazilian sense of the word, Brazilian observers would not agree. Luckily the leader of this group, Mário Sabuneti, explained this concept to Malamusi. He said that that the term samba, as he uses it, comes from the verb *kusamba*, which means 'to bathe' in his language. He found that his hand movements playing all those eight drums were comparable to the movements of a person bathing in the river, even swimming. The example is quite instructive. It demonstrates how across different cultures an apparently identical word can have very different implications.

For this reason, I think we have to be methodologically careful and perhaps avoid taking terminology as a starting point in the search for common denominators by first categorizing as samba various types of Brazilian musical forms that may be historically connected or not and then trying to construct a common denominator. In that sense, samba would merely be a phantom concept. I would opt to start the other way around and begin with the phenomenon, begin with one or two or three specific groups in a selected region and find out what the performers themselves call their music, including their audiences, and then through trait-by-trait analysis check whether designation and salient traits can be matched. Finding out common denominators is possible, but it is not always possible by starting from a mass of wild data and proceeding down to the individual groups. It is advisable to

start from a small set of data, perhaps just one group, and gradually build up your potential for comparison to a level of similarities on which we can be sure that the groups are still stylistically comparable.

Therefore, a question such as the one posed: "If there are a hundred types of samba in existence, where are the common unifying principles?" actually translates this way: "If there are a hundred different forms of music in many different areas that different people all call samba, what common basis justifies calling these phenomena by one name?" I am concerned with the observers' thoughts without taking their behavior of categorizing for granted. I'm asking the question why is such and such a person calling this animal a cow and not a buffalo? Are they really similar or do they appear to be similar only from the angle of the person's narrow experience?

So, in other words, I recommend that we should also go into the cognitive aspects of the question, before we decide about common denominators that might be scientifically valid. I suspect that all these so-called forms of samba are, in fact, very many different traditions and they have only been given one name, a popular name, because there is no other category to stimulate people's imagination. Could it be that the term samba is becoming more and more generic?

T.: Not necessarily. On the one hand, there is indeed the necessity of having a general popular term for a national genre, which is samba, no doubt. But what I mean goes far beyond the stage of just identifying genres that are called samba. For this kind of misleading approach we have a good example with the *batuque*, the designation of a musical genre that already came up in sixteenth-century Angola and also in Brazil, keeping its designation to our days. Across the centuries, *batuque* just meant "music and dance performed by Africans", a characterization used by the Portuguese colonizers without reference to any other trait that could define the phenomenon in some way. If there are single genres nowadays called *batuque* – like the one at Capivari, São Paulo that you also have studied – these are more recent developments. My hypothesis regarding samba takes only those forms into consideration that are conceptualized by musicians and amateurs as having common elements, which are considered as identifying samba, or that at least are obviously samba-like. Not even the designation of these genres must necessarily contain the term. Take for instance

bossa nova, or *partido alto*, which are two clear samba forms. In the Recôncavo region of Bahia, it is apparent that the different ways of designating and practicing samba in *samba-de-roda*, *samba chula*, or *samba-de-viola* share common ideas, which at the same time are related to a broader concept of samba.

K.: It is legitimate to analyze historically certain present-day expressions, such as *samba-de-roda* as performed by Nicinha do Samba from Santo Amaro in the Recôncavo. We can apply two methods: one is trait-by-trait analysis, for example, we determine which of the so-called asymmetric time-lines are used by the group, what kind of multipart patterns occur, what kind of organization between lead singers and group response can be found, and so on.

The other method is conceptual analysis. We find out what kind of terminology these people use when they communicate within their musical group, and we also find out what kind of aesthetics is the basis of their value system, i.e., what is good from their viewpoint and what is considered to be bad in sound or combination; in other words, what is agreeable, what is acceptable. We observe how they correct what they call mistakes within the group. Such a methodology gives us intimate ideas about group specifics and at a later stage we can compare the data-base obtained by this method with a similar data-base obtained from another group and thereby – you understand – build up a larger sample. At the last stage of this research, if the aim is to trace certain characteristics to their ultimate historical background in the music history of another continent, we can continue the process of inquiry on that other continent and analyze relevant materials here.

T.: Your suggestive viewpoint reminds me that in our research we bring up interesting new insights by adopting some sort of elaborated empirical methods. Since we are dealing with expressive culture, e.g. with performance in a broad sense – musical structures, dramatic aspects, dance, linguistic particularities, or ritual contexts, just to mention a few elements that attract our attention in the field – we must be aware that gathering this huge amount of data is just a first, though indispensable stage in our cultural research on transatlantic connections. It never ends here (otherwise we could easily be considered folklorists collecting materials for a museum of folk arts and crafts). Interpreting our data is, therefore, the other important task in order to

shed light upon this significant chapter of a history of mentalities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Getting back to the previously mentioned subject, I could say that my hypothesis regarding different, but pertinent samba genres, is that by selecting their traits in order to isolate those particular elements that are shared by all *sambistas*, *sambadores*, *sambaristas*, and *sambadeiras* as being relevant to identify samba as such, we will get to the ultimate level of African concepts and of African aesthetic feeling. It is of utmost importance to stress that this African aesthetic feeling has its source in Central Africa, among Bantu-speaking people. I am afraid that this idea can be upsetting, causing discomfort to many intellectuals dealing with local and popular culture in Brazil (and with national and world cultural expressions as well). There is hardly any other musical genre that expresses more convincingly a broad Brazilian sense and common feelings, independent of what its signification may be, than samba. Therefore, you can imagine what it means to some of my compatriots if it turns out that the essence, something like a 'common denominator' of samba, is African, more precisely Bantu, and that it has remained as such for centuries. In such a case the notion of Brazil as a melting pot determining the completely different social environment of people of African descent in the country is a shambles. What about the alleged originality of Brazilian culture? These and similar concerns might possible be brought up by those startled by our findings.

I can give you an example of the ambiguous status of samba, something with an African flavor that has been covered up by a national identity. In the 1960s, Vinícius de Moraes and the guitar virtuoso and composer Baden Powell created their *afro-sambas* to make clear that they were digging deeper into African cultural elements in Brazil and suggesting at the same time that samba alone is not "Afro". The most curious fact is that most of Vinícius's and Baden Powell's *afro-sambas* are not sambas in a strict sense at all! They have been inspired by and adopted from Candomblé religious music from Bahia, and do not constitute any special form of samba, regardless of their designation.

I'm trying to argue that, in the framework of transatlantic expressive cultural principles, research on samba stands for an illustrative paradigm of a common meaningful state of mind that has remained

and becomes the foundation of a manifold cultural output on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, an output of creativity that has never ended, despite all adverse impositions by history.

Regarding the term "black music", this had gained importance in the United States but has never been really en vogue in Brazil. Instead, *música afro* is more popular, especially in the Bahian musical scene, than *música negra*. In the case of the *afro-sambas* mentioned above by Vinícius and Baden Powell the term "black" simply does not exist. During my field research in the Recôncavo in Bahia in the 1980s, I did hear neither the term *música negra* nor *música afro* among the local population. But, as soon as the popular *blocos afro* from Salvador invaded the small cities in the Recôncavo at the end of the 1980s and were adopted mainly by teenagers, the term *música afro* came into sight designating new, modern, and young local genres.

There is another color symbolism in music, not referring to the skin of the performers but to the sound spectrum (timbre) of a sound sequence, for example the specific sound of an instrument like *berimbau*, with its unique *squitim* etc. The way Brazilian musicians deal with these specific colors can also refer to African concepts. When I participated at the meeting at the Ministry of Culture in Brasilia to discuss among experts the implementation of a Museum of Afro-Brazilian Culture in Salvador, Bahia, in 2002, I used the term in this double sense, arguing, that the constitution of Brazilian culture up until our days can show, that the color of sound ("a cor do som") has not to do a priori with the skin color of the people who play this music. I think, this is a very instructive and rather Brazilian feature of Afro-American culture across the South Atlantic Ocean. Meanwhile, a Museum of Afro-Brazilian Culture has been inaugurated in São Paulo in 2005 as the result of the efforts of Emanuel Araújo, whose private collection comprises the biggest part of the museums' exhibition space.

One of the outstanding pioneers of Afro-American studies is W. E. B. Du Bois, who wrote down his remarkable observations concerning the "soul" of African-American people more than a hundred years ago. *The Souls of Black Folk* as formulated by Du Bois might bear the essence of the idea of Afro-American cultures expressed by performance models of different kinds. *The Souls of Black Folk* is the first original theoretical tool for understanding Afro-American culture

and reality. Could Du Bois's concept of "soul" – as a metaphor for concept, idea, African community feeling – also embody a common designation of African and Afro-American cultures?

K.: I read W. E. B. Du Bois many years ago and I'm particularly grateful that Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written a very informative introduction to a new edition of his work first published in 1903, now available as a pocket book in several editions. When re-reading Du Bois it was fascinating for me to learn how the first impressions I had gathered from *The Souls of Black Folk* have not changed over decades. This is a book that has stood the test of time and it is a fountain of information that never runs dry. This includes his description of late nineteenth-century musical developments among people of African descent in the United States. In a restricted social environment such as on the plantations, it was virtually impossible for the African population to carry on with expressive traditions handed down by their ancestors if not in the context of Christian religion or working conditions. Of course, these had to be modified according to the new social circumstances. It is fascinating to learn that sentences such as the following could have been written in 1903:

> Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folksong – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people (Du Bois 2005: 186).

T.: Yours and recent studies of several of our colleagues stress again and again that the analysis of African music in general, and including Afro-American music, cannot be based on concepts such as 'indigenous' versus 'foreign', or 'traditional' versus 'modern'. Furthermore, it seems to me completely misleading to describe musical sounds as either 'genuine' or 'hybrid'. No culture, and here specifically no music, can be described as 'hybrid', for everything that exists does so genuinely, and every culture is ultimately a mixture of the most diverse elements that came together in history. This term has been bor-

rowed from genetics to describe phenomena, which often are non-genetical, that is to say, they are learned in specific ways.

K.: I don't think it is necessary that we bother Gregor Mendel to explain how the history of cultures develops. Genetics and cultural studies were two different areas of research until recently. One was considered to belong to the so-called hard sciences using the standard scientific methods for research. The concept hybridization, for example, refers to the reproduction of species through the extended network of transplantations that connects them (Müller-Wille/Rheinberger 2007). The attempt to transfer this concept from the natural sciences to philosophy and history of cultures does not always work. The first question that comes to mind would be: if there are any so-called hybrid cultures, what is the opposite? The problem is that no opposite can exist in this case unless we assume that there are cultures that have existed in a stable state for thousands of years. For such an assumption, however, there is no evidence, neither archaeological nor based on other kind of sources. On the contrary, we can proceed from the assumption that cultures have constantly changed in history through the forces of borrowing, adaptation, and innovation. In other words, all cultures are by nature hybrid. From that perspective the concept of hybrid cultures has lost its diagnostic significance.

What we can do in cultural studies in reference to a certain region, for example, Minas Gerais or Bahia in Brazil, is to work with the data material provided by our written, pictorial, musical, and other sources in order to reconstruct the processes activated during certain time-periods changing human life and human interaction. This enables us to learn a great deal about what really happened in the past. We can confidently dispense with models or even labels (such as hybridization, cultural memory, roots etc.) that pretend to explain facts even before we have put them on the record.

T.: Gerhard, you seem to like deconstructing most of the terminological tools used in cultural studies. Those you mentioned may be more or less outdated, but then, what remains from an established terminology for our 'cross-cultural and transatlantic' and recent research?

G.: By far not outdated are Melville J. Herskovits's tools he has given us long ago for this kind of research. His concepts of selection, reten-

tion, survival, reinterpretation**,** and cultural focus are still useful tools for the study of cultural contacts. I am not the only one who has had the courage to declare this, but many other colleagues, including blues researcher David Evans, share my opinion. It is important to understand that Herskovits did not want to create models to determine or describe the outcome of cultural contacts, but most of his descriptive vocabulary has aimed at unraveling the behavioral patterns human beings develop in a situation of cultural contact. Confronted with another culture the following basic mechanisms in the human brain are activated: 1) Cognitive reactions; and 2) affective-emotional reactions. Herskovits was particularly concerned with the cognitive realm and he discovered that in contact with another culture we always select what we wish to incorporate into our conceptual world, what we want to adopt, while many other things are rejected. That is what Herskovits used to call selection. Simultaneously we tenaciously retain certain forms of behavior, certain modes of thought, and certain habits, which we have brought along. That is Herskovits's retention. But the most important concept, which Herskovits developed, is the concept of reinterpretation. It describes the fact that, when we human beings are confronted with something unusual or unknown, we tend to reinterpret it in terms of the categories familiar to our own conceptual world. We translate, so-to-speak, the new experience into a comprehensible framework of previous experiences. All these reactions are highly important and they have determined the behavioral patterns of people from all over the world who came together in America. Herskovits's ideas allow us to reconstruct case by case how the participants in this 'encounter' have reacted towards each other, attempting to understand in their own ways the meanings of the other groups' actions. Such an encounter is very complex and can only be researched with a vast data base. It cannot be described with simplistic notions such as "New World", the "melting pot", or "hybrid cultures", "cultural identity" etc.

I described a very nice example of reinterpretation in the sense of Herskovits in my book *Extensionen Afrikanischer Kulturen in Brazilien* (Kubik 1990) for the Brazilian *umbanda* religion. *Umbanda* comes from Angola. In Angola the term means "traditional medicine", "traditional healing practice". The person who is in charge of this medical practice is called *Kimbanda*. In Brazil these Angolan concepts

were reinterpreted. Umbanda has become something like a religion promoting contact with the transcendental world through an initiated medium. It is also sometimes used synonymously with the Brazilian concept of *magia branca* (good, healing magic, considered to be white). *Kimbanda* appears in Brazil under the spelling *quimbanda*, but it has totally changed its original meaning. It no longer refers to a person, but the term addresses the force opposite to healing magic, called *magia negra* (black magic).

What has happened? Reinterpretations have a psychological purpose. They satisfy the needs in the people concerned that may be unconscious. We are witnessing here what an essentially racist society is doing to African terminology. While *umbanda* as a healing practice with a religious background was accepted in Brazil, the African practitioner of this healing practice was apparently not acceptable. So, the notion *kimbanda* was depersonalized. It became a symbol of evil forces, of witchcraft. All these Angolan concepts had the fate of being reinterpreted in terms of a basically racist black/white dichotomy, black being synonymous with evil, white synonymous with good.

T.: I am sure, that due to recent research and to the systematic collection of data in the near future, the dissemination of knowledge about African cultural history in Brazil can increase constantly, and people will become aware of cultural reinterpretations like this you just mentioned. At least you feel at the moment a real general interest in that field. This may also be due to a Federal Law from 2003 that foresees the implementation of courses in African history in elementary schools across the country. Even if there are not enough teachers, who can integrate these courses in the school curriculum yet, it is encouraging to see that many institutions have reacted positively to the law. The Center of African Studies at the Department of Anthropology of our university in São Paulo (USP) has implemented a one-term extensive course in African Studies for schoolteachers and interested students since 2004. And we have experienced serious attempts to do the same at the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife, during our Summer School in March of this same year.

A few examples of text books for teachers on African and Afro-Brazilian history have been published meanwhile, with the purpose of introducing the subject to an educational system which until now has

neglected it almost completely. Even if still far from having at our disposal a comprehensive bibliography published for a wide public on Africa and its history in Brazil, never before we experienced such an effort in informing on the African presence in the country, especially for teenagers and the younger generation.

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